



## ABA supports community TV channel

*The ABA has recommended that the last free-to-air television channel (the sixth channel) be used for community access television.*

Last month, the ABA provided the Minister with its report, *Inquiry into the future use of the sixth television channel*. In July 1996 the ABA was directed to conduct a public inquiry into the future uses of the sixth channel, taking into account the interests of existing and potential users. Following the receipt of about 255 letters and submissions, the ABA released a working paper in October 1996, having identified funding and structural arrangements for community television as the primary deficiency in the submissions received.

### Benefits of community access TV

Generally, submitters to the ABA's inquiry perceived that a community access television service would have the capacity to:

- increase the diversity of services offering entertainment, education, and information;
- develop and reflect a local sense of identity;
- provide diverse and innovative programming; and
- be responsive to the need for fair and accurate coverage of matters of community interest, including adequate coverage of matters of local significance (p 38).

Endorsing these views, the ABA rejected other suggestions that it be used for non-broadcasting purposes, digital testing, niche services or exclusively for educational, arts, children's, family/Christian or youth purposes.

The ABA was of the view that the success of community access television is dependent upon its ability to provide a wide coverage service, which would impose a significant financial burden on a licensee relying on sponsorship revenue alone. The ABA concluded that the provision of a wide coverage service would

be most successful if:

- there is some level of commercial involvement to support the infrastructure requirements, leaving responsibility for other content to the community access television services;
- the boards and management of community access television services have members and staff who have financial, managerial and technical expertise rather than simply accommodating as many interest groups as possible; and
- the community broadcasting licensing regime in the Act is used to provide long-term security instead of continuing the open narrow-casting class licensing arrangements and the uncertainty they generate (pp ix-x).

### Hybrid funding model

The ABA recommended a 'hybrid' funding model based on non-government funding. In this model, a transmitter provider would enter into a contractual relationship with a community television licensee to meet the costs of transmission equipment and operation in return for the commercial use of a limited number of hours of airtime on the service (the ABA suggests two hours per day).

Further recommendations relating to this funding and structural model include that the airtime sold should be managed on a licence area basis in order to enable the licensee to negotiate the best possible arrangements; the development of a charter about access and obligations to be vetted by the ABA; and the retention of a four minutes per hour cap on sponsorship announcements.

In relation to the licensing of community television services, the ABA confirmed the need to retain merit-based licence allocations. However,

it also acknowledged the limitations of the Act and the need to develop the current assessment criteria in the Act to more adequately reflect the need to licence applicants with particular knowledge and expertise. There was support from submitters for the licensing of applicants who, in particular, can demonstrate financial, management and technical expertise and are able to provide evidence of negotiations or a contract for access to transmission facilities.

Finally, the ABA concluded that, should adequate funding not be available, the sixth channel should be left vacant for a later review.

### The Centre's submission

In its submission to the ABA on the development of the hybrid model, the Centre expressed its concerns about the potential inequality of bargaining power between the board of a community broadcasting licensee and a commercial (or other) operator interested in acquiring prime-time television exposure at the best possible price. The Centre considered that the brokering of such deals might be better dealt with by a national organisation, such as the Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF), negotiating with a range of skills, knowledge and expertise on behalf of all licensees. However, the ABA rejected any such involvement by the CBF.

The Centre also recommended that, should the ABA's funding model be adopted, its impact on the community television broadcasting sector should be reviewed at regular intervals. The ABA's report makes no comment on the need for such reviews if its recommendations for non-government funded community access television services are accepted by the Minister. □

**Sue Ferguson**